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### The Gandhian Myth in Kanthapura

Abstract: Raja Rao's magnum opus Kanthapura is a ground shattering literary piece. The present article focuses on his use of myth as a literary technique and how he creates a contemporary myth around Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Movement that he led. The article also tries to bring out the juxtapositions between the traditional myth and the contemporary myth as is reflected in the novel. The author has tried to use the various concepts of myth theory and analyse the creation of the Gandhian myth in the novel.

Key words: Kanthapura, Gandhian myth, Raja Rao

“The human consciousness assimilates all knowledge in a synthesis thereby producing or giving rise to myths” - Somerset Maugham

Myth can be described as the symbolical expression of the depth of human existence and as such, it is suggestive rather than being advocative. Writers throughout the ages have used myth

in different ways and for different reasons. The use of myth as a literary device usually imparts a certain universal significance to a particular outlook. When an author uses myth as the framework of his or her work, it is perceived that they want to draw a parallel of the contemporary circumstances with that of the situation of the legends. In fact, the use of the mythical techniques throws light upon the present situation, putting it in the correct perspective and thereby linking the past with the present.

Myths are also used as symbols. The use of myth as symbols lends significance to all the facets of life – social, religious and even political. Symbolism can be simply defined as the representation of something. In fact, symbolism lies at the root of all art. We use symbols in our everyday life either consciously or unconsciously. The symbols that we use become important on their own account and we become oblivious to the fact that it represents something else.

An author considers it his duty to point out to the readers the significance of the external symbols. The dramatic genre is particularly adapted to the treatment of symbols as it deals with visible actions. The actors and the stage are representative of persons and places in a play. Creativity plays an important role in the arts as it is a personal creation thereby licensing the playwright to discard the conventional symbols and create new symbols that expresses the peculiar meaning he desires to express. Thus the utilization of unconventional symbols is lent suitable only to the representation of the esoteric.

Raja Rao is known for his habit of simplifying myths and fables as is attested by Rajeev Taranath in his “A Note on the Problem of Simplification” wherein he states that “Eliot’s use of myth is part of the essential structure of his creation. In Raja Rao it is subsidiary”. Raja Rao’s mythic design is hard to ignore. Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Twice Born Fiction* observes:

“Kanthapura is narrated by an old woman to a hypothetical listener....Raja Rao’s choice of this narrator serves several purposes at once. Making this old woman the narrator enables Raja Rao to mingle facts and myths in an effective manner. For the old woman, Jawaharlal is a Bharata to the Mahatma who, she believes, will slay Ravana so that Sita may be freed. For her Gandhi has attained the status of God and Moorthy is regarded as avatar in Kanthapura. The characteristically concrete imagination of the uneducated mind pictures the Mahatma as large and blue like the Sahyadri mountains on whose slopes the pilgrims climb to the top, while Moorthy is seen as a small mountain. To her, the Satyagraha becomes a religious ceremony to which she devotes her sacred ardor” (Mukherjee,1971: 39)

Myths are an integral part of Raja Rao’s works and they effectively integrate his experiences.

Raja Rao’s first novel, *Kanthapura*, is a confluence of the political, religious and social experiences in the Gandhian era. He has inextricably interwoven these experiences artfully interpreting them through the use of myths and symbols into one complex plot related with the village of Kanthapura. The novel depicts the era of the Gandhian movement as was enacted in a village. The village Kanthapura, as is depicted in the novel represents the whole country of that time. Raja Rao has immaculately drawn his characters from all castes of an ordinary Indian village giving the atmosphere in the novel a touch of reality. Although Mahatma Gandhi is absent from his novel, his spirit pervades throughout it. In fact, the entire novel is sustained by the spirit of Gandhi. As K.R.S Iyengar remarks :

Kanthapura is a veritable grammar of the Gandhian myth-the myth that is but a poetic translation of the reality. It will always have a central place in Gandhi literature (1984:396)

The novel is rustic in nature, detailing the story of Kanthapura as it rallies to the Mahatma's call for non-cooperation to the British Empire. The novel vividly describes the Indian Nationalist Movement of the 1920s and how numerous Indian villages responded to Gandhi's call. It also narrates the confrontation of a static and archaic village with the historical reality of the present in the form of the Gandhian socio-political agitation.

Rao creates the Gandhian myth so that he can be fit in the fictional mode. He deifies Mahatma Gandhi by likening his birth and childhood to that of Lord Krishna:

You remember how Krishna, when he was but a baby of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country. And as he grew up, and after he was duly shaven for the hair ceremony, he began to go out into the villages and assemble people and talk to them, and his voice was so pure, his forehead so brilliant with wisdom that men followed him, more and more men followed him as they did Krishna the flute player, and so he goes from village to village to slay the serpent of the foreign rule (Kanthapura 12)

The novelist creates a mythic circle in his work by merging the modern Gandhian myth with that of the Indian national myth personified by Rama and Sita, who have been deified in the Hindu consciousness. In the end of the novel, the old woman affirms her faith in Gandhi's leadership, who has come to be seen by the masses as India's Saviour.

We are all for the Mahatma. Pariah Rachanna's wife, Rachi, and Seethamma and Timmamma are all for the Mahatma. They say there are men in Bombay and men in Punjab, and men and women in Bombay and Bengal and Punjab, who are all for the Mahatma, They say the Mahatma will go to the Redman's Country and he will get us the Swaraj. He

will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air, and brother Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the Master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya there will be rain of flowers (Kanthapura 189).

Rama, the protagonist of the Hindu epic Ramayana, is the epitome of goodness and an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The purpose of his incarnation was to bring about the destruction of evil, personified by Ravana, the antagonist of the epic. The battle between Rama and Ravana is often seen as the battle between the good and the evil forces, ultimately bringing about the destruction of the evil in the end.

Raja Rao juxtaposes the myth of Rama and Ravana with that of the British times in India. The British became the Ravana of those times with their policies of exploitation and subjugation of the Indian masses. Gandhi's appearance in the scene of India's freedom movement was perceived of as the emergence of Rama by the Indian people. The humiliation that Gandhi was subjected to in South Africa was like the humiliation of Rama by Ravana when he kidnapped Sita, Rama's wife. In the modern myth, the Freedom of the Indians became the Sita of Rama. Gandhi had to fight for freedom just like Rama did for Sita. Gandhi's visit to the Round Table Conference of 1931 was akin to Rama's visit to Lanka to bring Sita back. Just as the people of Ayodhya waited for the return of Rama so did the people of India awaited the Gandhi's return anxiously.

Moorthy, the local leader of the village Kanthapura has also been mythified by Raja Rao as the avatar of the god Rama. The Britishers or the Reds as they were known has been mythified as the asuras or demons. The clash between the satyagrahis and the imperial forces has been

symbolized as the fight between the forces of good and evil. Just as Rama had Hanuman as his trustworthy lieutenant, so did Moorthy had Seenu as his trustworthy messenger, devotee and worker. As K.R.S Iyengar remarks:

“The reign of the Red – Man is Asuric rule and it is resisted by the Devas, the Satyagrahis.

The characters sharply divide into two camps; the Rulers (and their supporters) on the one hand and the Satyagrahis (and their sympathisers) on the other” (1984:49).

The intertwining of the traditional mythology with that of the contemporary reality is ingenious in Kanthapura. The mythicising of the movement adds a new dimension to the struggle of independence, for the exaggeration of reality by myth is the necessary way of achieving the eternity in space. In the novel, Mahatma Gandhi is portrayed as the symbol of divinity as well as a tangible reality. The influence of the Indian mythic traditions on Raja Rao is quite palpable in his use of the Indian scriptures.

The use of mythical technique ensures the juxtaposition of the past with the present rendering the author to either criticize or heighten the present. Raja Rao uses this technique to glorify the contemporary and to impart to the novel the dignity of the scriptures.

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